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Reflections on Siberia's "Gloomy River"

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Abstract In the 1980s the Soviet Academy of Sciences proposed to build a massive dam and hydroelectric station on the Lower Tunguska river in the Evenki Autonomous Okrug (now a municipal district of Krasnoyarsk Territory). This would have been the largest and most northerly hydroelectric station in the world. Plans for the project were abandoned with the collapse of the USSR. The plan was resuscitated twenty years later, only to be abandoned again. This essay explores themes of protest, anticipation, and deferral in the context of a highly marginalized Indigenous population. Moving between literary and media critique to social theory, we suggest that the effects of the dam proposals produce conditions for enduring feelings of indeterminacy.

Keywords Evenkiia · Hydroelectric power station · Indigenous peoples · Industrialism · River life · Siberia

> *The sail of time is strong, the paths are eternal, its limit, is the chaotic expanse of the ocean.*
>
> Vyacheslav Shishkov.[1]

> *It becomes sad and scary in the soul when you think about what awaits us in the near future.*
>
> Alitet Nemtushkin.[2]

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, thousands of people—many of whom are Indigenous Evenkis—have lived with the threat of displacement from the construction of a massive hydroelectric dam on the Lower Tunguska[3] River in the Central Siberian Plateau. While it has never passed the planning stage, should it be built, the dam's reservoir would swell up far past the natural banks of the river, drowning villages, reindeer pastures, cemeteries, and other places of cultural and ecological significance. From Moscow's perspective it is a straight forward game of numbers. There are simply not enough people in the area to matter—even with the additional cultural capital, slim as it is, of Indigenous claims to ancestral territory, economy, and culture. We have heard it said that state planners looking at the Indigenous Evenkis, who once lived nomadic lives, cynically state: "They have done it for thousands of years—they can just move!" Not only does this misrecognize the nature of reindeer pastoralism, suggesting that nomads don't have a connection to place, but it is parasitical on the adaptability and flexibility of those whose lives are built around pastoralism, fishing, gathering, and hunting. To add insult to injury, it fails to acknowledge the culturally meaningful lives Evenkis have built since they were forcibly settled by the state in the mid-20th Century. Twice proposed and twice deferred, the very idea, threat, and promise of the dam—its anticipatory spectre—has produced a coercive temporal orientation[4] where the near future is bracketed off as not only unknowable but as perpetually and explicitly threatening (Figs. 1, 2).

[1] My translation from Shishkov's *Gloomy River*, which is said to be based on his travels along the upper reaches of the Lower Tunguska River.

[2] Nemtushkin (1988, p. 3; translated from Russian).

[3] The Lower Tunguska is an English translation of the Russian name: *Nizhniaia Tunguska*.

[4] Note Mark Rifkin's discussion of temporal orientations in *Beyond Settler Time*: "To speak of temporal *orientation* suggests the ways that time can be regarded less as a container that holds events than as potentially divergent processes of becoming" (2017, p. 2). We consider a coercive temporal orientation to be one that captures and shapes such 'processes of becoming.'

An article called "The Gloomy River" [*Ugrium Reka*] was published in *Soviet Culture* on August 12, 1989. The Gloomy River's dramatic title was counterposed to a dazzling image taken from the back of a motor boat along the Lower Tunguska River. Brilliant cirriform wisps are stretched and painted across the sky above cumuliform clouds, heaped over a horizon cut by a heavy black line of hills and a larch-treed shore. The rip of disturbed water catches sparkling sunlight. It is a decidedly non-gloomy picture; a perfect puzzle of an opening image for an essay that describes a river in danger of being turned into a dead zone by Soviet industrialization. In this article, the author, Vladimir Kiselev drew on traditions of moralizing social critique to sound an alarm for a river threatened by the construction of a hydroelectric dam, which at that time was named Turukhansk. He borrowed the title "gloomy river" from Vyacheslav Shishkov's popular 1933 socialist realist novel depicting a pre-revolutionary Siberian drama of gold rush and petty-bourgeois romance in the waning years of the Russian Empire. *The Gloomy River* described, among other things, the abjection and oppression of Indigenous peoples living between the Yenisei and Lena rivers in eastern Siberia.[5] Kiselev's little article, written fifty years after Shishkov's novel, is a more pointed expression of outrage for the treatment of "Russia's natives"[6] and for the enduring conditions of neglect (from terrible housing to precarious access to clean drinking water). Perhaps publishing this article in *Soviet Culture* was an expression of hope that Kiselev invested in culture's capacity to speak back to industry. It was an urgent claim that in the Soviet Union all peoples matter, regardless of ethnic difference, regardless of how small their population is. That journal is remembered as one of the more liberal publications of the late Soviet era when Perestroika and Glasnost promised solutions in the midst of uncertainty and momentous transformations. In 1989 Kiselev describes the risk of the proposed plan to build a dam on the Lower Tunguska river:

> Under the permafrost there is a lot of salt, with concentrations that are two hundred times the norm of what is found in ordinary water. The operation of a hydroelectric station would lead to a locally warming climate and the gradual thawing of permafrost. Salt would leach into the Lower Tunguska and part of the Yenisei up to the Arctic Ocean turning it into a dead zone (Kiselev 1989).

Had he known about secretly buried nuclear waste on the bank of the river, his predictions about the impact of the hydro dam would have been even more dire and urgent. Kiselev's article in *Soviet Culture* is descended from a robust thread of discontent and struggle manifest through the later years of the soviet project (Weiner 1988; Yanitsky 2012). It is useful to think of Shishkov's original *Gloomy River* as a story that marked the beginning of the Soviet era while Kiselev's article provides an impactful bookend to the communist experiment. Ultimately, they both tell stories about the Lower Tunguska River from the perspective of expert outsider. From our vantage—after over thirty years of transformations in the Russian Federation—we can see a neat diagram of industrialism and the disappointing revelation that soviet socialism was just another form of colonial rule. Like elsewhere in the world, the concerns of Indigenous minorities living beyond the pale of urban life have been overwhelmed by the state's commitment to extractivism.[7] While hydroelectricity is broadly celebrated as a costless energy source it has been denounced by countless Indigenous groups for the ways in which it is used to justify theft of land and the ways in which it displaces and conceals environmental degradation (Stavenhagen 2013; Paulose 2021).

The Gloomy River, one of the great Siberian novels, is what we might think of as late Holocene literature—stories that can be read elliptically to see the concerns and fascinations of writers not yet aware of the scale and effects of the global terraforming project brought about by industrialism. Shishkov's novel was meant to illustrate a tragically corrupted world prior to Bolshevik liberation. Kiselev's article, on the other hand, demonstrates entangled concerns first for the environment and second for Indigenous minorities. It participated in a cultural mode of critique emergent in the late Soviet era. As we shall see, *post*-soviet narratives operate within a similar terrain of solidarity against the greedy and rapacious drive of industrialism. Such concerns serve to critique the Russian state as a colonial project in Siberia. Whether it is defined as settler socialism, socialist colonialism,[8] or something else, the naturalization of Siberia as the indivisible and integral

[5] Shishkov's novel was based in part on his experiences as an engineer? Travelling along the Podkamennaia Tunguska and Lower Tunguska rivers in the tumultuous years leading up to the 1917 October Revolution. *The Gloomy River* was made into a film in the late 1960s and later released as a mini-series which aired in 2021.

[6] These quotes indicate an attention to the paternalistic language of Kiselev. Without naming the colonial histories that gave shape to everyday life such narratives ultimately cast Indigenous peoples as lacking in agency and needing the protection of the state that has claimed the world as its own.

[7] Following Alberto Acosta's definition, we use extractivism: "to refer to those activities which remove large quantities of natural resources that are not processed (or processed only to a limited degree), especially for export. Extractivism is not limited to minerals or oil. Extractivism is also present in farming, forestry and even fishing" (2013, p. 62).

[8] "Settler Socialism" is a term explored by anthropologist, Grace Zhou, following Wolfe (2005). While "Socialist Colonialism" (Campbell 2014) has been used in a similar manner; to explore the Indigenous experience in Sibeira and Central Asia through comparative colonialisms.

Fig. 1 Author modified map showing the location of Evenkiia in the Krasnoyarsk Kray and the Russian Federation, 1993

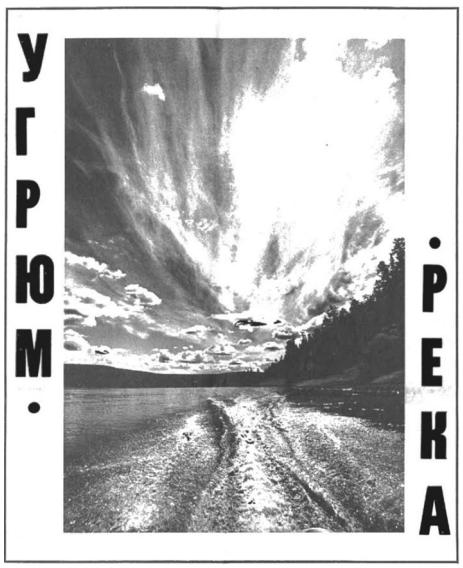

Fig. 2 Image from cover of Kiselev's (1989) article "The Gloomy River"

property of Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union leaves little room for Indigenous claims to land, let alone sovereignty (Suliandziga and Suliandziga 2020).

The dam on the Lower Tunguska River has been officially proposed and officially deferred over the span of thirty plus years, first in the 1980s and then again in the early 2000s. Two decades after that last deferral there are again rumblings of reviving the megaproject. This indeterminacy produces for residents in the flood zone, not only a known unknown but one that is fully illustrated and described. Imagine living in the shadow of a catastrophic event that threatens your home, and that while it's arrival would be predictable, it also may never come to pass. How does this transform your relationship to the future, to the land on which you and your family have lived for generations? Questions like this have led us begin to theorize the effects of a population's prolonged exposure to a frozen future catastrophe.[9] We think about this media ecology as meshwork of remediations, as collective nesting affects. These are variably shared imaginaries, made explicit and contained within other narratives and experiences. Flooded

[9] Our own ethnographic research has been deferred first by global pandemic and then by Russia's belligerent invasion of Ukraine. When it is again safe to conduct research in Evenkiia we will undertake more comprehensive research on the sense of ambient threat that the dam will eventually be built.

villages are imagined, for example, not just in words but also through maps that offer a calculated degree of water-level rise, providing a diagrammatic illustration of planned erasure. The calculated specificity of such diagrams is nested within other imaginaries gleaned from the ambient media of news reports, literature, movies and which is circulated through everyday encounters, news stories, conspiracies, gossip, and rumors. This milieux of the proposal itself occurs within the dominant naturalized frame of industrialism: a set of beliefs—both socialist and capitalist—that has prioritized large-scale industries and mass-extraction of natural resources above all else (Campbell 2016).

Industrial transformations with their associated extractive resource economies have been an unevenly distributed global endeavor culminating in, among other things, 'The Great Acceleration.' This planetary event, born of the mid-20th Century, describes a dramatic intensification of human-caused global environmental impacts affecting the "the state and functioning of the Earth System" (Steffen et al. 2015). The 'Great Acceleration' might also be an apt title for the Soviet rush to industrialize the Yenisei North—a geographical designation that refers to the area around the northern reaches of the Yenisei, the fifth largest river in the world. It flows nearly 3500 km northwards from mountains in Mongolia and Tuva in southern Siberia through Khakassia and the entirety of the Krasnoyarsk Krai to ultimately disembogue itself into the Arctic's Kara Sea. Through the nineteenth century the Yenisei began to experience increasing industrial transformations. As a critical transportation route, settlements grew and new ones appeared along the banks, supported by busy river traffic. Mining and logging operations increased supporting an expanding population, even as the fur hunting industry lost its prominence. By the mid-20th Century, the Yenisei River had become a heavily industrialized river with major industries, numerous dams, and extensive effluent from human settlements, agriculture, mining, and logging. Nick C. Davidson, a wetland ecologist, writes that although the Yenisei may seem to be in a remote part of the world, its lower reaches are among the most polluted of Artic rivers (2016, p. 1477).

As it passes along the Western border of Evenkiia[10] numerous wild and comparatively clean rivers, including the Lower Tunguska, add their waters to the Yenisei's northerly flow. The rivers of Evenkiia freeze and thaw with the seasons as they have done for millennia, though the conditions for cycles have become increasingly unpredictable due to global warming. Many other Russian rivers have experienced significant industrial transformations in the twentieth century (Josephson 2017). While hydroelectricity experts and industry apologists have cast it as renewable energy, there is increasing evidence that major dams have significantly contributed to global warming (Maavara et al. 2017). The Yenisei itself has been dammed in multiple places, most notably with Russia's largest power plant, Sayano-Shushenskaya in Khakassia—a dam that saw a catastrophic failure in 2009, killing over seventy-five people and adding to a well-established sense that industrialism's gifts and grand endeavors come at a cost borne by some more than others. While such industrial accidents are not what The Great Acceleration is supposed to describe, they are component to megaprojects, which as Paul Virilio has reminded us, invent their own catastrophe (2007). It is a poverty of imagination that fails to anticipate the accident invented by industrialism's desire. Those who live in the shadow of extant and planned dams are well aware of the dangers and threats of hydroelectric megaprojects.

The villages along the Lower Tunguska River are populated mostly by Indigenous Evenkis and ethnic Russians (Povoroznyuk 2014). Those who live there are school teachers, elderly pensioners, farmers, administrators, factory managers, school children, foresters, engineers, cooks, and so on. Some Evenkis are also professional reindeer herders and hunters. They are living a cultural practice, labor, economy, history, philosophy, religion, epistemology—all of which might be bundled into the capacious and plastic words: everyday life. In many ways the villages along the Lower Tunguska River look like other villages across Siberia and the Russian Far East where twentieth century industrialization had two principal branches: resource extraction and traditional Indigenous economies. The later, though labeled 'traditional,' were significantly restructured and remade for industrial modernity. Over time, the Indigenous peoples[11] living in remote villages and settlements of Central Siberia experienced decreasing access to the infrastructures and outputs of industrial modernity; what locals often referred to as "*tsivilizatsiia*." They were, in part, facing a variety of problems associated with geographical isolation; itself a product of soviet planning.[12] The patched and reworked matter of Soviet-era settlements and the ruins of their requisite infrastructures constituted vivid material reminders of a built environment maladapted to the conditions of nascent post-Soviet

[10] Evenkiia is the colloquial name for the Evenki Municipal Region (2004-pres.), formerly known as the Evenki Autonomous Okrug (1978–2004), Evenki National Okrug (1930–1978).

[11] The current designation is translated as "Native small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation" (*Korennye Malochislennye Narody Severa,Sibiri,i Dal'nego Vostoka Rossiiskoi Federatsii* 2009), also called native small-numbered peoples of the North (*KMNS*). We also use "Indigenous peoples of Siberia" in this paper, which is a term used by the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON).

[12] Campbell (2003).

Russian capitalism. These inland settlements had become increasingly ill-suited to the needs of remotely located rural peoples in the first decades of the post-Soviet era. They navigated the residual infrastructure of a no-longer socialist state. The settlements' structural effects of demobilization were less technologies of containment than they were unanticipated but ultimately accepted by-products of a state steadily retreating from social obligations.

In the Soviet-planned transformation of Indigenous societies, everyday life and more-than-human relations which had been classified as economic activities, were rearranged; ways of being were identified and extracted from everyday life as economic activities, and they were reimagined as professions and reorganized under new labor regimes. Thus, an Evenki lifeway and human-animal social relationship is reduced to "reindeer keeping," becoming the modern compound word: *olenevodstvo* (cf. Anderson 1991). Likewise, fishing was reconceptualized by the state as an economic category of labor to become *rybolovstvo*. Hunting and trapping were also each treated as bureaucratized categories of labor split apart from the holistic activity that was once part of everyday life. All of these came under the purview of 'rural economy' [*sel'skoye khozyaystvo*]. We might think of this as the imposition of a proletarian temporality, an experience that quantified and rationalized units of time. Laborers in the reindeer breeding economy were now working on a shift schedule and the taiga was transformed from a home to a work site. Time was increasingly homogenized and standardized—such a consolidation of temporal orientations was produced at all levels of social life: from schooling to military service all peoples became *soviet* through a shared experience of soviet time.

In Siberia today, Soviet residues and socialist legacies continue to perform an outsized role in shaping everyday life (Ssorin-Chaikov 2016a, b). Research has shown that a state-sponsored neocolonial approach to development was clearly evident in the implementation of economic megaprojects across the north (Biuro Ekologicheskogo i Sotsial'nogo Konsaltinga. 2008; Ushakov et al. 2012). They show a demonstrable transition from a strategy for the development of Russia's northern territories. While development once featured the long-term settlement of a significant part of the newcomer population in permanent villages, it now features the intensive economic exploitation of the hinterlands by workers involved in transient labor and shift-work practices (Ablazhey and Ablazhey 2010).

One of the enduring experiences of disempowerment of those who live in Evenkiia is the feeling of outsiders making decisions that affect their lives. Feelings of powerlessness are compounded in a place like the Yenisei North. Soviet planners created a geography through forced sedentarization, village consolidations, and economic industrialization. Evenkis, like other Indigenous peoples, were brought into the soviet family of nations, but only on the conditions of soviet socialism. Those who live in Evenkiia exist on the margins of political power—far not only from the Kremlin, but conceptually dwarfed by industrialism's bureaucratic calculus—there are 'very few people there after all.' The Indigenous peoples themselves were given a name that exposes modernity's struggle with scale and symbolic value: "Small-numbered Peoples of the North." The Soviet minoritarian subject and their legacies have created an enduring tension for Russian economists and technocrats. In a socialist state the needs of the masses and the need for *some* the masses to sacrifice more than others were two sides of the same coin, baked into the USSR's ideological foundation. In the thirty years since the end of Soviet socialism, the neoliberal authoritarianism of the Russian Federation hasn't changed for the better. Russia's northern development policy has demonstrated a near-totalizing commitment to extractivism that is seen to benefit the Russian state with little concern for the protection of the economies and ancestral lands of "small-numbered" Indigenous peoples. Scale is everything for industrial economies. This social geography endures today though it has been threatened by the proposed hydroelectric dam. Should the dam be built, the forced resettlement of peoples would profoundly disrupt their lives.

Extractivism describes most colonial economic relationships around the circumpolar North. Imperial Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation can be all be described as extractivist colonial states. The logic of extraction is built on a kind of aesthetic regime that perceives the world according to 'resources' that can be used to supply industrial production. In Evenkiia, extractivism has been almost exclusively concerned with mining, though the traditional economies of Indigenous peoples that have been industrialized (or 'modernized') are also a kind of extractivist orientation. The conceptual transformation of timber, furs, reindeer meat, berries, and fish into 'resources'—part of a 'gameboard of variabilities'—dissociated them from holistic Indigenous *oikos* rendering them as economy within an extractivist episteme.[13]

What does the future feel like for those living in villages located along Siberia's Lower Tunguska River in the Evenki Municipal Region of Krasnoyarsk Krai? Before asking those questions, one must work through the temporal contours of the idea, to fine-tune a description of industrialism and planned catastrophe in the context of a territory that is perennially described as 'remote' and 'rich in natural resources,' two terms that more-often-than-not are synonymous with colonialism and extractivism. Those who live or have lived and conducted research in Tura and other places along the Lower Tunguska River are sensitized to the residual infrastructures of socialist planning. As researchers we have witnessed the remarkable resilience of

[13] Cf. Acosta (2013) on extractivism but also Wilson and Stammler (2016) for their examination of extractivism in the Arctic.

people living through the diffuse pressures of enduring-colonial rule; a feeling nurtured by national and regional infrastructures in conditions that range from ruin and dysfunction, slow and haphazard repair, to erratic renovation and occasional innovation. And yet, as one Evenki interlocutor notes: "regardless of government programs and interventions, reindeer herders manage, and they will never say that they feel bad, according to the customs of our ancestors we are taught to not talk about the bad."[14] She herself, as a political actor, is hardly shy of speaking about the bad. Along with countless other Indigenous people who have been forced into political actions more legible to ruling powers, the tensions of cultural conflict under conditions of colonial rule present an endless flow of difficult choices.[15]

THE LEGACY OF TWO UNBUILT DAMS…

> "Now that our country has begun the unprecedented extraction of the wealth of the North, which we use for the benefit of our entire society, it is our duty to make this harsh land suitable for a decent life for all its inhabitants and, perhaps, first of all, its indigenous population. Let's not forget that the North is their homeland! And if the vast majority of the rest of the inhabitants of the region leave here sooner or later, then the indigenous northerners will always live here! (Savoskul and Karlov 1988, p. 168)."

Were a massive hydroelectric dam to be built along the Lower Tunguska, the river would undergo an industrial transformation and cease to be what is sometimes called a 'wild river.' Villages would be forcibly evacuated and thousands of people would be displaced from their homes located in the flood zone. Already it has been proposed twice since the 1980s. Each time studies have been commissioned, public hearings and meetings organized, and protests of various sorts have been expressed. Both times the project was abandoned. First, because of the collapse of the Soviet Union and second, in part, because of the "great recession" of 2008–2009. An entire generation has had to learn to dwell in the suspended temporality of a monumental transformation (Fig. 3).

Turukhansk hydroelectric project

The first time it was proposed, the project was called the Turukhansk Hydroelectric Station [*Turukhanskaia Gidroelectrostantsiia*]. The name was borrowed from Turukhansk—a nearby regional capital with historical roots dating back to the 1600 s—located at the confluence of the Yenisei and Lower Tunguska rivers. In December 1987, in the midst of historic economic reforms associated with *perestroika*, then president of the Academy of Sciences spoke in favor of the construction of the Turukhansk Hydroelectric power station. Planners argued that there would be no negative impact or consequences for the environment, the economy, or the population of the region (Ushakov et al. 2012). In their opinion, there was no land with real economic promise, the Lower Tunguska River was "not rich" in fish resources and it did not play a significant role in the reproduction of fish stocks in the Yenisei. It was a river that from the perspective of the state could be justifiably industrialized and sacrificed to a greater purpose. In return for this 'impactless' Century Project, people of Evenkiia were told that they would be gifted with new housing, better electric connectivity, and a winter road connecting the power station with the regional capital, Tura. A year prior to the Kiselev's "Gloomy River," in a 1988 letter to the editors published in *Soviet Ethnography* titled "the Turukhansk Hydroelectric Station and the Fate of Evenkiia" anthropologists S.S. Savoskul and V.V. Karlov describe the reservoir that would be created by the dam as a "dead abyss" which would constantly wash away river banks and would force people out of places where they have lived for countless generations. At that time, it was planned that the reservoir would flood all seven settlements along the Lower Tunguska, including the capital Tura. They estimated that more than ten thousand people would be displaced, making up approximately half of the population of the district (Savoskul and Karlov 1988, p. 167). The rapid implosion of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s ensured the demise of the project. Assembling the vast financial structures necessary to build such an enormous dam evaporated in the tumult of the soviet collapse. Yet the dreams of hydropower engineers and state planners did not disappear.

In those waning years of the Soviet Union, Alitet Nemtushkin, an Evenki writer and journalist known mostly for his poetry, decries the failures of the state's organization of Indigenous labor. One infamous article, resulted in him being accused of Alien influence; in it, Nemtushkin wrote:

> Pain and anxiety for the *fate* of native nature became especially aggravated in connection with the planned construction of the Turukhanskaya hydroelectric power station. There are no feasibility studies yet, and the construction of a road to the site of the future dam is already underway from the Kureyskaya HPP, and labor force is hastily transferred from the Sayano-Shushenskaya HPP. Specialists of interested

[14] *Anonymous, personal communication.*

[15] See for example the activism of Yana Tannagasheva. (Tannagasheva 2021).

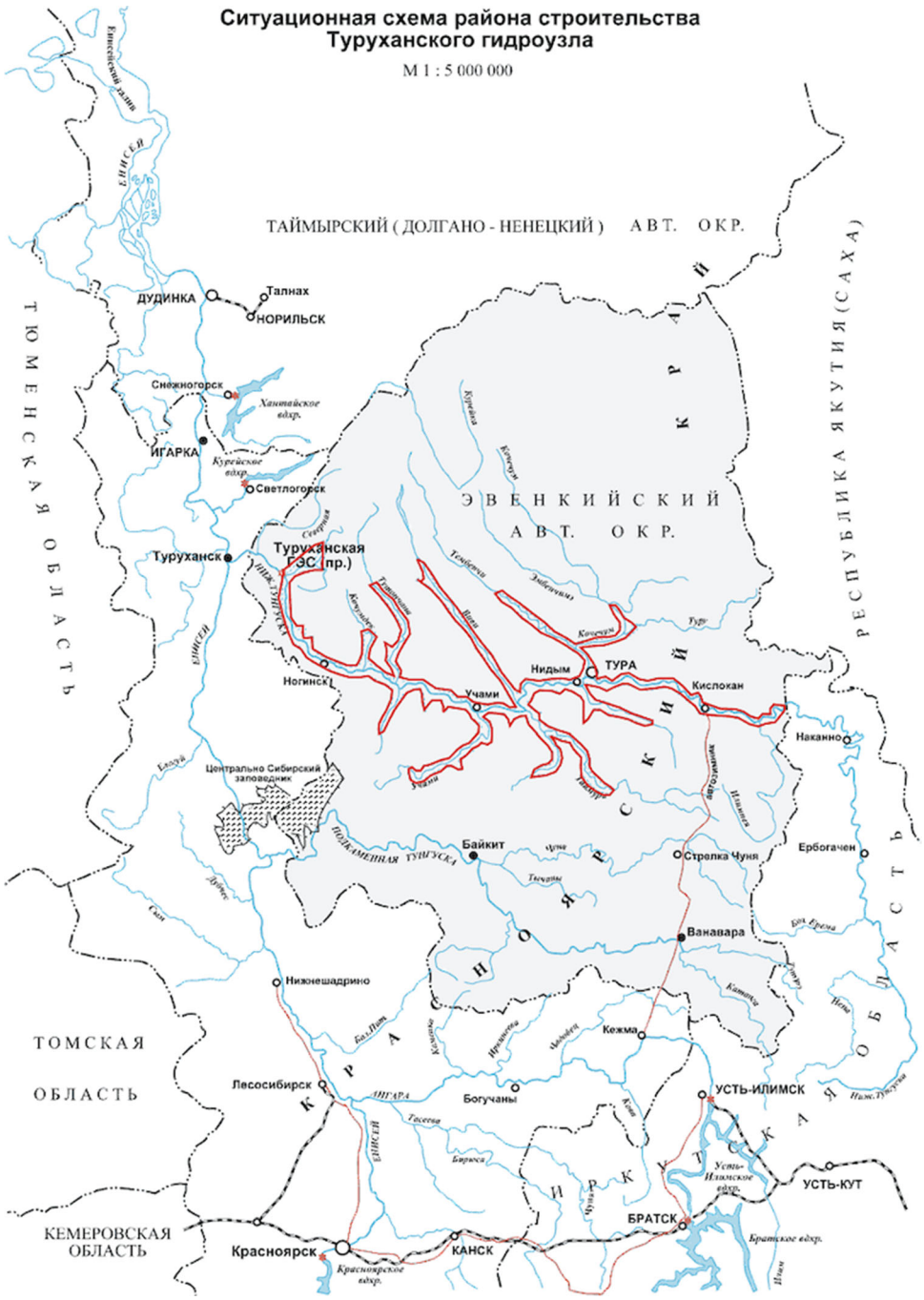

Fig. 3 Map diagram of the proposed location and flooding effects of the 1988 Turukhansk Hydroelectric Station. (Lenhydroproekt 1989)

ministries and departments have dragged the public into fruitless discussions, where they convince us with large numbers that the new construction is beneficial in all respects—they say, new cities will grow, civilization will come to remote taiga corners—and deliberately bypass that damage, which the dam will inflict on the earth, water, and the whole living world. (Nemtushkin 1988, p. 3; translated from Russian, emphasis added).

With the rhetorical force of language characteristic of a writer, Nemtushkin asks us to dwell in a suspended temporality that must cast his people into a dreaded state of anticipation. Anticipation is a term which might be a gloss for waiting or expecting—and which also seems to be a

composition of affective labors. In anticipation's lived composition (waiting, working, putting-off, getting-ready, forgetting about it) the spectrality of the future emerges as both a rhetorical and an expressive genre.[16] At times it seems to haunt by casting doubt on what might have once seemed inevitable. For Nemtushkin, *plenty* is less certain than *damage*. Anticipation, then, also produces a kind of burdensome uncertainty, the weight of which becomes haphazardly legible and unevenly distributed. At times the spectrality of the future, amplified by a dam proposal, energizes action in expectation of what might never come to happen: collective protest, rumor about corruption and selfish motivations, as well as more sedimented cultures of complaint and sensitivities to structures of disempowerment. Those non-specialist bystanders to the eclipse of an industrial idea—the public—are dragged into "fruitless discussions" and interminable consultations; they are dragged into a world of extractivist and industrialist logics that span late socialism and early market reforms (Fig. 4).

Evenki hydroelectric project

Twenty years after it was abandoned, the plan to build a massive hydroelectric complex on the Lower Tunguska River was revived under a new name: the Evenki Hydroelectric Station [*Evenkiiskaia Gidroelectrostantsiia*]. In this name change the Indigenous people (Evenki) who have claimed this territory since time immemorial were invoked along with the region (Evenki Municipal District) which is bifurcated by the Lower Tunguska River. In a 2008 conference event, then chairman of the Unified Energy System of Russia,[17] Anatoly Chubais, expressed unbridled enthusiasm for the plan to build the Evenk hydroelectric power station. Performing a bombastic-style of Russian masculinity, claiming space by entitled and charismatic fiat he stated breathlessly:

> This is not just the most ambitious project. This project is one of the largest in the world. *In – the – world!* Neither in Russia nor in the USSR there is anything like it, comparable to it . . . the Boguchanskaya hydroelectric power station is 3000 megawatts. The Evenk hydroelectric power station - 8000 megawatts and two thousand kilometers to the north. This is a project like that. Wow! Collosal![18]

Behind Anatoly Chubais hung a banner for GOELRO-2, a grand scheme, whose very grandness revives the electrification dreams of Vladimir Iliich Lenin under the title of "State Commission for the Electrification of Russia." Like the fantasy that Moscow was the third Rome, GOELRO-2 was touted as a lynchpin for "the Second Industrialization of Russia." The original electrification plan from the 1920s, GOELRO, "reflected the faith of Vladimir Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders that large scale technologies would transform a nation of peasants into an industrial powerhouse overnight." (Josephson 2003, p. 277). The empire looks manageable from such great heights as provided by maps and charts or egos and dreams.

When Chubais argued for damming the Lower Tunguska river, he fervently noted that they would need "Tons and tons of cement… for the Tunguska is a very fast river." This is an expressive form. Let's call it the *Soviet Industrial*, a national dreamscape defined by volumetrics: grids, polygons, and cubes. Managerialism drove process and populated its imaginary with a gameboard of variabilities: networks facilitated through channels of authority that we might now think of as the infrastructures of late socialism. The *Soviet Industrial*, a kind of technological sublime was not so different from the "American technological sublime"[19] which manifested a quasi-religious collective veneration of the machine. Chubais, it turns out was one of the main architects of privatization in Russia. The phrase "Chubais is to blame for everything" stuck as a popular political meme of the late 1990s marking him as one of Russia's favorite scapegoats.[20] The *Soviet Industrial* as a politico-aesthetic motif has persisted under the guise of a neo imperial Russian industrialism. Industrialism we learn, is an ideologically agnostic worldview: the indefinite growth model that justified it has been equally important under socialist and capitalist formations.

While opposition to the plan of 2008 elicited an array of opinions and expressions, the most commonly heard complaint was against the inundation of Indigenous lands—which are not legally recognized as Indigenous territory but rather as land belonging to the Russian Federation which is allocated for traditional economic uses. A sociological study carried out as part of the government mandated impact assessment determined that 87% of the population of Evenkiia were opposed the construction of a hydroelectric

[16] It is also component to a larger problematic that we call wyrd anthropology, the crux of which is built upon a set of claims around divination and anticipation set against temporal compositions and expressive genres that have characterized the discipline.

[17] The dam was originally by the Unified Energy System (UES) of Russia. It was the predecessor of RusHydro. UES was run by Anatoly Chubais. The breakup of UES was apparently seen as a massive privatization of the power industry in Russia. The Russian Federation owned a controlling percent of stocks in the power companies.

[18] From a Krasnoyarsk news broadcast, archived by the activist group, Plotina.Net! Kolotov, Alexander Anatolyevich. "Воды протеста, или Эвенкия против ГЭС." Плотина.Нет! (blog), March 18, 2009. http://www.plotina.net/vody-protesta-ili-evenkiya-protiv-ges/.

[19] Cf. David Nye's *American Technological Sublime* (1996).

[20] The Bell (2018).

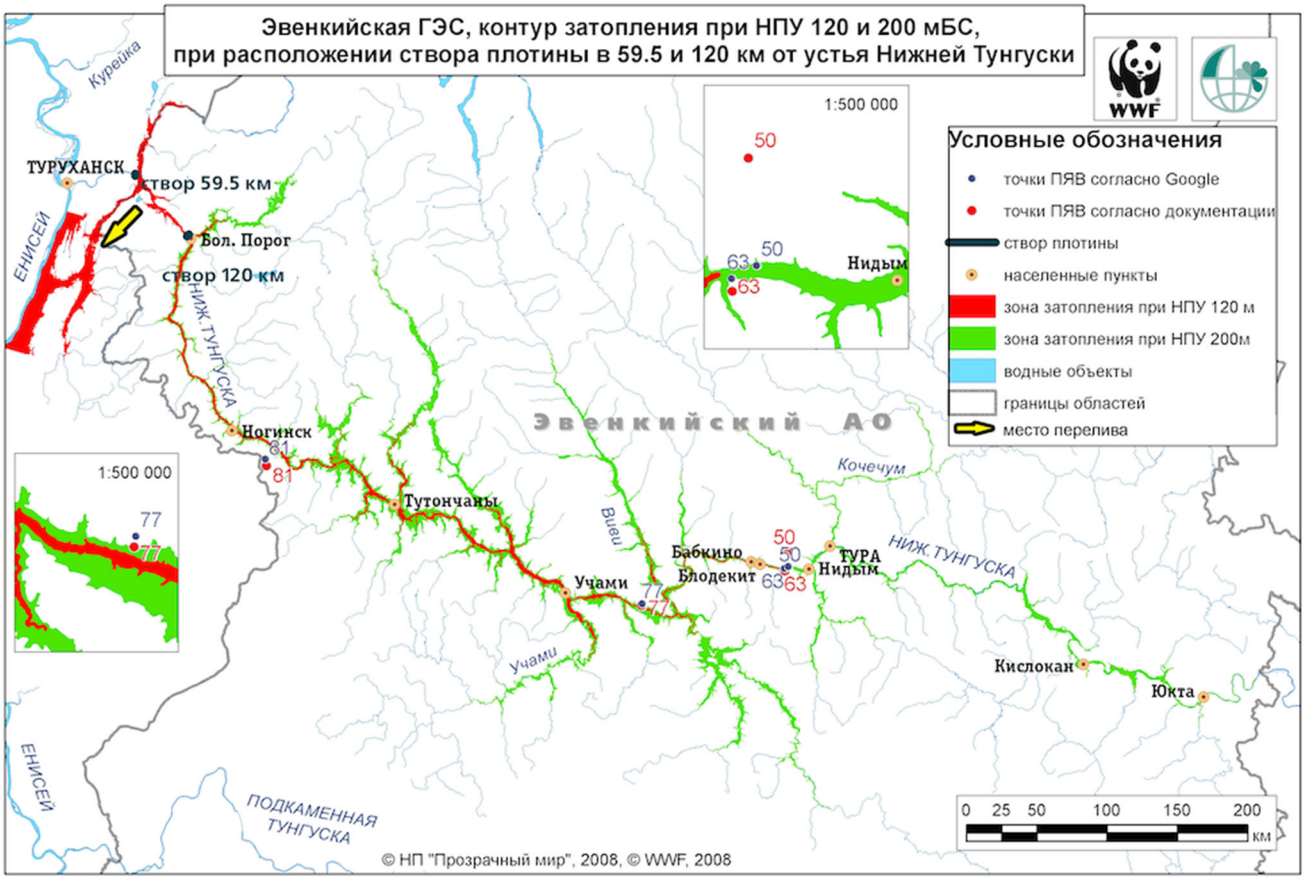

Fig. 4 Map diagram of the proposed location and flooding effects of the 2008 Evenki Hydroelectric Station. (Prozrachnyi Mir and WWF 2008)

complex (Ushakov et al. 2012). According to this study the majority of respondents agreed with the statement that, "the construction of the hydroelectric power station will cause irreparable damage to the environment of the Evenki/Turukhansk municipal district, so I do not care about the socioeconomic effect of its introduction." (Biuro Ekologicheskogo i Sotsial'nogo Konsaltinga 2008, p. 14). Furthermore, the report notes that the majority of ordinary residents felt certain that there would be no benefit to Evenkiia itself for the construction of the hydroelectric power station: "there is no reason to hope that with its commissioning one of the region's most serious problems will be solved—electricity supply." (ibid: 139) An organization known as Pacific Environment dramatically pronounced the inevitable "cultural extinction" of over 7000 Indigenous Evenkis, should the river be dammed (2013). In a local news broadcast, one Evenki woman voices deep concern about the destruction of smaller rivers where her family has hunted for generations.[21] It is of course not just the Lower Tunguska that is threatened but all of her minor tributaries as well: Kochechum, Vivi, Uchami, to name just a few.

In one public hearing (Plotina 2009) held on September 18th, 2009 in the regional capital of Tura, dozens people, many of whom were Indigenous Evenki spoke against the dam. These included individuals recorded as 'resident,' 'hunter,' 'teacher,' as well as administrators of various kinds. Ironically these hearings were held barely a month after the accident at Russia's largest hydroelectric dam, the Sayano-Shushenskaya, killed over 70 people. On August 17, 2009 a catastrophic failure in a turbine caused a massive explosion and subsequent flooding. Sergei Shoigu, then minister of emergency situations, declared that this was "the biggest man-made emergency situation [in] the past 25 years–for its scale of destruction, for the scale of losses it entails for our energy industry and our economy."[22] Here, as elsewhere, it must be noted that the suffering of a few for the benefit of the masses is at the heart of Russia's relationship with Indigenous peoples. Shoigu's reference to 'our energy industry and our economy' is an appeal to a certain kind of national belonging often unfelt by ethnic minorities across the Federation.

[21] From the 2009 program "Krai na nedeliu: Evenkis GES: Waters of Protest".

[22] Hasler (2010).

One participant in the public hearing articulated her skepticism:

> the opening of the Evenki hydroelectric power station is like a conscious sacrifice of the inhabitants of Evenkiia in the name of providing this electricity, which, by the way, following all these calculations, will go to completely different regions…. We work in a school, we teach children who then become adults and carry our ideas further. Question: Why are we talking about patriotism, why are we talking about preserving the environment, when by our silence we agree to the destruction of such a beautiful, magnificent place as Evenkiia, which you will not find anywhere else? (Plotina 2009, p. 17).

It was not lost on the local population that there would be very little in the way of benefit sharing; the great insult of the proposed hydroelectric dam was that there was no planned delivery of electricity to the villages along the Lower Tunguska, no guarantee of recompense for lost livelihoods (including local sources of wild 'harvested' food). Indeed, the surprising lack of foresight was taken in high degree as bad faith by many locals. RusHydro's extractivist approach imagined a set of abstract calculations that included only financial costs and benefits associated with the tremendous potential energy of a large dam.

CONCLUSION

The irony of fate [*ironiya sudby*] is a common Russian expression tinged with nostalgia and, since the 1980s, tied to a late soviet cultural landmark film. The irony of fate, however, is not just an everyday expression. It is also a genre of Russian experience that captures the formation of future feelings—the kind that bystanders might have felt as they witnessed a newly constructed boarding school burn to the ground because of bad wiring, while the sixty-year-old dilapidated dormitory across the street, replete with stinking outdoor toilets, remained defiantly untouched. One local journalist described this event as 'the irony of fate,' perhaps suggesting the absurdity and impossibility of expecting better out of life. Consider also prognostication and anticipation, two future orientations with different structures of causality. They point to, but are not exhausted by, a resignation to momentum and a coordination of terms as diverse as suspense [*neizvestnost'*], uncertainty [*neopredelennost'*], and inevitability [*neizbezhnost*]. The frequency of 'fate' in Russian writing and everyday discourse is significant and has been extensively examined by scholars including Anna Wierzbicka who describes it as a "key concept in Russian culture" (2010, p. 8) and a "native 'cultural script'... used to orient oneself in one's social life" (ibid: 21). Though largely divorced from overt superstition, it nonetheless bears semantic force to shape future feelings. The fate of a people or a culture bears the weight of historical consciousness.

How might we describe the enduring feelings of a structure indefinitely deferred within industrialism's ecologies. Where there is no dissipation of the dominance of one narrative for the future over another, there is a sedimentation of feeling around the experiences of not knowing and not having agency, of being caught in the flow of a plan. It is not the emergency of a plausibly catastrophic future but the emergency of inertia stuck in the current of alternately rigid and flaccid expectation, a suffocating foreclosure on the possible. Everyone in Russia is acutely familiar with examples of such felt indeterminacies; not just of the localized effects of industrialism in general, but of the specific costs of massive hydroelectric projects in particular: inundated ancestral territories and forced relocation to poorly-built apartment blocks.

The cultural critic Raymond Williams developed the term 'structure of feeling' to better describe how atmosphere and collective moods or emotions and affects could be understood as social as well as historical phenomena. He argued that a structure of feeling was as "firm and definite as 'structure' suggests,"[23] yet he also acknowledged its mutability and ephemerality. Regardless of its manifestation, its import is that it helps us to explain public feelings.[24] If we imagine industrialism not simply as a well-defined set of technical and material relations but also as a structure of feeling, we might begin to appreciate his sense.

Vulnerability and precarity emerge as persistent questions that trouble our individual and collective acts of living towards the future amidst the volatile residues of industrialism and the accelerationist violence of extractivism. We're always starting in the middle, sometimes more explicitly and with more self-awareness than other times. In looking at an incomplete proposal we gain a language for anticipation's suspension. Suspended anticipation in turn, in its own middle of producing an enduring before of the dam, a before of the industrialization, projects out into the future as a new imaginary. And yet, we suspect that this is something that troubles us more than people in Evenkiia. We suspect there is a force of stabilization at play—as a herding of affect (like any act of herding, there is always a degree of coercion) that faces a challenging world, those things that are not at hand, that one cannot (easily) control, are not taken too seriously. The force manifests both benignly and aggressively. Prudence and caution are denigrated as hysteria.

[23] Williams (2006, p. 64).

[24] Staiger et al. (2010).

As Siberia continues to burn and to melt, burn and melt, perhaps the construction of the dam will become a moot point for Evenkis, living increasingly in difficult times. The dam's reservoir is explicitly tied to loss of land, economy, and culture. The diagrammatic specificity of water-level rise and the predictive accuracy of impact assessments (as much as they are challenged for their failures and inadequacies) present a more or less stable depiction of the future. Global warming, on the other hand, casts the entire taiga—traditional places of Indigenous land use—as precarious zones of ecological indeterminacy. Under climate change, wildfires and unpredictable weather are compounded by apocalyptic thermokarst landscapes rendering the land, a site of critical cultural and economic struggle, increasingly irrelevant to the economic interests of the state. It is in such marginal places, the spaces on the side of the road, where sovereignty can happen. Or a kind of sovereignty anyway, an ephemeral or suspended and conditional decolonial, where the ravenous gaze of the authoritarian state compounded by capitalism withdraws its actors and interests (though never fully abandoning its righteous claims to the land). Climate change has wrought not toxic sovereignty (Povinelli 2016) for Evenkis in this part of the taiga, so much as apocalyptic sovereignty.

Three Russian economists recently published an article in the *International Journal of Energy Economics and Policy* reviving the idea of a hydroelectric power station on the Lower Tunguska River. They write, advocating for the Evenki dam to become "the leading, first-priority facility in Eastern Siberia" and they revive the notion of sacrificability: "This pearl of the national hydropower industry and its reservoir are located almost in a deserted region of the country, ensuring minimal damage to the economy, social sphere, and the environment." (Bogoviz et al. 2020, p. 485). But let us finish with the words of one who counts the taiga as homeland rather than zone of sacrifice. The Evenki writer Alitet Nemtushkin, ends his brave protest of 1988 with the following words:

> "It seems that our country needs a law on priority land use. Then the rights of small nationalities and ethnic groups will be protected. In questions of large-scale construction and exploitation of natural resources, the first and decisive word must belong to the peoples of the local indigenous nationality. At the same time, one must always remember that they cannot live without nature. That is why I appeal to prudence, which can prolong our earthly existence." (Nemtushkin 1988, p. 3; translated from Russian).

Declarations

Conflict of interest Neither of the authors have any conflict of interest to report. Research was conducted with publicly available materials and published works. All research complied with ethical standards.

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